



Data Policy Brief

Measuring Migrant Political Participation: Current Evidence Landscape and Data Gaps

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1. Introduction

This Data Policy Brief, compiled for data stakeholders, explores the availability of participation outcome data for meaningful research on the effects of policies.^[1] It highlights significant data gaps in the measurement of migrant political participation, particularly in administrative data. Survey data remain the primary source for comparative analysis, despite limitations related to sample size and underrepresentation. The brief concludes with recommendations for improved data availability.

Migrants' political participation encompasses multiple dimensions, including electoral and non-electoral engagement, institutional representation, and broader attitudes towards politics and society. Political participation outcomes can be measured using a wide variety of data sources, ranging from administrative records collected by national and international statistical offices, to self-reported information collected through surveys.

Research on migrant political participation tends to focus on institutional and contextual factors shaping different levels of migrant engagement in the political process. This partly reflects the types of data that are most readily available: information on laws, institutions, and political frameworks is systematically collected and comparable across contexts (Morales and Giugni, 2011). The ideal dataset for studying the political engagement of migrants should meet several criteria:

- Cross-country comparability
- Oversampling of small migrant groups/ethnic minorities
- Clearly defined target population
- Drawn from population register
- Accounts for a variety of electoral and non-electoral participation
- Large sample size

1. For the wider research of the New Europeans Initiative on the effects of policies on political participation of migrants see Yavçan, B., Agrillo, C., Gautam, A. (2026). From Policy to Practice: How Political Participation Frameworks Shape New Europeans' Political Engagement. Migration Policy Group

2. Administrative data

However, despite notable improvements in the quality of migrant-related data in the last two decades, there remains a lack of harmonisation of data collection and access across Europe. Differences in administrative systems make it more challenging to merge and compare registry-based information. For example, Germany has a more decentralised system as compared to the Netherlands, even though both countries use the same definition of migrant (Andreß & Careja, 2018). While Scandinavian countries maintain highly comprehensive registered data that include migrants, these datasets often lack information to non-electoral participation or other subjective indicators. This makes it difficult to have a multidimensional and cross-country analysis of migrant integration.

There is also no standard definition of 'migrant' in both registrars and surveys. Some datasets categorise 'migrant' according to country of birth, others do parents' country of birth, citizenship, or length of stay (Anderson & Blinder, 2024). According to Patrick Simon (2013), only 19 out of 41 countries collect data on citizenship and place of birth, among who 6 define according to parents' place of birth. Others rely on alternative indicators such as ethnicity, nationality, religious denomination, or language spoken at home.

This gap in availability of data on migrant origins in Europe is partly the result of migrant background data being classified as sensitive and partly rooted in historical or political beliefs. Collecting data on ethnicity has been viewed as either unnecessary or inaccurate in analysing the population of a state. Census data implemented during the 19th century were closely tied to nation-building projects and sought to invent the nation of cultural homogeneity by trying to unify categories of ethnicity. Furthermore, the use of census and population registrars to identify, target, and persecute specific social, ethnic, and religious groups had devastating consequences in World War 2. As a result, many European countries remain wary of collecting data on social group membership (Simon, 2013).

To address this inconsistency, some measures such as the Political Participation Policy Index further disaggregates migrants according to several categories: third-country nationals (TCNs), EU mobile citizens, refugees, asylum seekers, second-generation migrants, and undocumented persons (Yavçan et al., 2024). However, this distinction is rare in most large-scale, cross-national datasets and is not consistently applied across countries. Quantitative evidence on non-electoral political participation is scarce in administrative records, especially regarding migrant representation, and dataset sizes decrease sharply when disaggregated by migrant background.

Good data practices: The Scandinavian case

Scandinavian countries are some of the few countries that maintain strong data practices on migrant populations. Population registers in these countries provide effective tools to conduct research due to their accessibility, systematic data collection, and diverse categorisation of migrants.

Data is collected in a highly systematic and integrated manner. They encompass most of the legal migrant population, and are maintained over a long period of time, allowing for longitudinal analysis. Furthermore, while it is a challenge for many European countries to develop identical, nationwide population registries, some Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Sweden have employed the use of 'personal identification number' systems that link individuals throughout all national registries (Careja & Bevelander, 2018). For some countries, this level of integration is not feasible due to decentralised municipal registers (as in Germany) or reluctance to centralized identification systems due to historical, political, or ethical concerns (as in France) (Andreß & Careja, 2018).

Scandinavian data registers also recognize heterogeneity in migrant populations, through subcategorisation of migration. For example, Finland disaggregates data by EU mobile citizens, third country nationals, and nationals of Iceland and Norway, as well as by Finnish or foreign background and language. Sweden disaggregates according to country of birth and citizenship, while Denmark distinguishes between persons of Danish origin, immigrants from western and non-western countries, and their descendants. This level of detail allows for more nuanced analysis of first- and second-generation migrants, third-country nationals and EU mobile citizens.

However, some important limitations persist. Scandinavian countries have not escaped the pitfalls associated with registry-based data. For example, they do not collect attitudinal or subjective data, such as values, or perceptions towards democratic institutions or voting, which are essential for understanding political participation. Furthermore, they also run the risk of over and under coverage. Over coverage is particularly common among mobile populations, particularly EU mobile citizens, due to weak incentives to deregister residency. Under coverage may also occur, though incentives to register are generally stronger (Andreß & Careja, 2018).



3. Survey data

Surveys, on the other hand, are more consistent in capturing the diverse ways in which people engage in non-electoral participation, though high-quality large-scale surveys often remain relatively rare. They generally provide a more comprehensive range, many incorporating measures on non-electoral modes of participation, and demographic variables that allow disaggregation by migrant background (to some extent).

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4. Naturalisation rate

The acquisition of citizenship is an important component of political integration, as it provides the legal basis for electoral participation and the exercise of voting rights (Yavçan, Yılmaz and Gorgerino, 2024). For this reason, it is relevant to include naturalisation rates among the variables studied. Considering observed naturalisation rates is useful to assess whether more enabling policy environments for political participation are reflected in naturalisation outcomes. The Eurostat database provides data on naturalisation rates for the period 2014–2023 for 32 European countries, of which 27 are EU Member States. Within naturalisation rates, Eurostat distinguishes between three categories: foreigners who acquired citizenship, non-EU citizens who acquired citizenship, and EU citizens who acquired citizenship.

5. Electoral participation

The most common measure of electoral participation is voter turnout, as voting is generally the most widespread form of political participation in a democracy (Huddleston, 2017). However, even though voting is often treated as the main indicator of political behaviour, relying too heavily on turnout can be misleading in the context of migrants' political integration, as it does not always reflect their political participation and may not even be the most common form of participation for some migrant groups (Morales and Giugni, 2011).

Official administrative data on voting turnout disaggregated by migrant background is limited. As a result, most research on migrant turnout relies on self-reported voting behaviour rather than official turnout statistics. At the EU level, there is no centralised source of administrative data on voting turnout or registration broken down by migration status, citizenship, or migration background. The availability of administrative data on the voting behaviour of individuals with a migrant background varies across European countries and years. The country-level information reported below includes only administrative data available from 2023 onwards.

Country	Type of data	Type of election	Categorisation of migrant
Finland	Turnout	European parliament elections 2024	Finnish and foreign background, and area (national statistics institute). Citizens of other EU Member States, citizens of Iceland and Norway and citizens of other countries. (Ministry of Justice)
		Municipal elections 2025	Finnish and foreign background, and area. (national statistics institute). Citizens of other EU Member States, citizens of Iceland and Norway and citizens of other countries. (Ministry of Justice)
		Presidential elections 2024	Finnish and foreign background, and area
		Parliamentary elections 2023	Finnish and foreign background, and area
		County election 2025	Citizens of other EU Member States, citizens of Iceland and Norway and citizens of other countries

Sweden	Voting turnout	European parliament elections 2024	Country of birth (born in Sweden or born abroad)
Belgium	Entitled to vote	Communal elections 2024	Belgian, EU, and non-EU citizens
	European parliament elections 2024	Presidential election 2024	EU voters disaggregated by nationality
Luxembourg	Registered voters	Communal elections 2023	Luxembourgish and non-Luxembourgish registered voters
	European parliament elections 2024	County election 2025	Luxembourgish and non-Luxembourgish registered voters
Portugal	Registered voters	N/A 2025	National citizens, EU citizens who are not Portuguese nationals and other foreign citizens
		N/A 2024	National citizens, EU citizens who are not Portuguese nationals and other foreign citizens
Spain	Registered voters	Municipal and regional elections (2023)	Spanish citizens living in Spain, Spanish citizens living abroad and foreign citizens resident

		European parliament elections 2024	Spanish citizens living in Spain, Spanish citizens living abroad and foreign citizens resident
Denmark		European parliament elections 2024	Danish origin, immigrants – Western countries, immigrants – non-Western countries, descendants – Western countries, descendants – non-Western countries
		Danish parliament	Danish origin, immigrants – Western countries, immigrants – non-Western countries, descendants – Western countries, descendants – non-Western countries
		Referendums	Danish origin, immigrants – Western countries, immigrants – non-Western countries, descendants – Western countries, descendants – non-Western countries

Greece and Estonia also provide some earlier administrative information on the participation of non-national residents in local and European elections, although these data are considerably older than the other country sources described above. Estonia publishes voter turnout for local council elections from 1993 to 2017, disaggregated by Estonian citizens, EU citizens, and non-EU foreigners. Greece publishes turnout data for municipal elections (1998–2010) and for European Parliament elections (2004 and 2009), with figures for EU citizens further broken down by country of citizenship.

The collection and reporting of official administrative data on voting-behaviour varies considerably across national contexts. Although some countries collect and publish administrative information on turnout or voter registration disaggregated by migration background or citizenship, these data cannot be combined into a single comparative source due to differences in availability, reference years, and the way population groups are defined and categorised.

Contrastingly, surveys allow for large scale collection of data and tend to include migrant background. For example, the OECD provides data on voter participation as the share of eligible voters reporting to cast their ballot in the most recent parliamentary

election in their country of residence, for 19 EU Member States. Participation rates are presented separately for native-born individuals, foreign-born individuals, and within the foreign-born population, settled migrants (10 years or more in the country) and recent arrivals (less than 10 years). However, 2020 is the latest year available. Furthermore, the World Values Survey (WVS) also provides information on political interest and political participation, and in particular includes a question on respondents' voting frequency. The most recent WVS wave covers 2017–2022 and includes data for 66 countries and territories. However, both sources do not have up to date information regarding voting behaviour of migrants and therefore will not be used in this report.

However, the European Social Survey (ESS) includes several questions on political interest and participation. For voting behaviour specifically, respondents are asked whether they voted in the most recent national election. The survey also captures migration background by collecting information on citizenship status, whether the respondent was born in the country, and their country of birth. Data is available for 22 EU Member States and was collected as part of the latest available European Social Survey round (ESS Round 11, fieldwork 2023-2024).

6. Institutional representation

In our research, we find that a limited number of countries document the migrant background of candidates or the elected in elections on official registrars. This is in Finland, Sweden, and Luxembourg.

Country	Type of data	Type of election	Categorisation of migrant
Finland	Candidates and Elected	County elections 2025	Foreign background, Finnish or Sami Speaker, Swedish speakers, Foreign-language speakers, language unknown.
	Candidates and Elected	Municipal elections 2025	Foreign background, Finnish or Sami Speaker, Swedish speakers, Foreign-language speakers, language unknown

	Candidates and Elected	Parliamentary Election 2023	Foreign background, Finnish or Sami Speaker, Swedish speakers, Foreign-language speakers, language unknown
Sweden	Nominated, elected, not elected	European Parliament elections 2024	Born in Sweden, foreign born
Luxembourg	Candidates	Municipal elections 2023	Luxembourgish and non-Luxembourgish
		European Parliament elections 2024	Luxembourgish and non-Luxembourgish

As a result, quantitative or large-scale studies on the political participation of people with migrant backgrounds remain limited, particularly in the area of institutional representation. Academic research has demonstrated there is a significant representation gap between migrants and non-migrants. At the moment, representation gap is mainly studied on a national basis. Geese (2022) demonstrate how an increase in descriptive representation of people with immigrant backgrounds in legislative bodies of 11 Western democracies reduced the turnout gap between migrants and natives, indicating a positive effect of descriptive representation on migrant electoral engagement. However, there is a consistent deficiency in representation of people with migrant background across Europe. A comparative study of 5 European countries (Netherlands, Switzerland, UK, Germany, and Spain) shows how despite a gradual increase in the share of immigrant-origin MPs in European national parliaments from 2012 to 2021, however, there is still a consistent underrepresentation of immigrant-origin populations in all parliaments (Bergmann et al., 2025).

7. Non-electoral political participation

Participation in political parties, trade unions, and advocacy groups are rarely categorised according to migrant background. The existing research on participation in political organisations/networks remains largely qualitative and comparative. For



example, Eggert and Pilati conduct a comparative organisational analysis on how migrant networks and political opportunity structures shape migrant political engagement across five European cities. They find that multicultural contexts foster greater political participation while assimilationist contexts can reproduce political marginalisation (Eggert & Pilati, 2014). Similarly, another comparative study investigates how funding contexts influence the opportunities of migrant civil society organisation across four cities in France and Germany. The authors find that funding can have a dual effect depending on local and institutional contexts: it may empower organisations by facilitating access to policymaking, but may also constrain political action (Lang & Badenhoop, 2025). While these studies provide valuable insight into the factors shaping migrant networks, civil society, and political engagement, such research is rarely conducted using large-scale, cross-national, quantitative data.

Nonetheless, the ESS can bridge the limitations discussed above by including variables that focus on an individual's engagement in political organisations or political networks. For example, questions such as "Contacted politician or government official," "Donated to or participated in political party or pressure group" or "Able to take active role in a political group" provide a very effective means of capturing non-electoral forms of political participation at the individual level.

8. Attitudes towards politics and the political system: identity, sense of belonging, trust, and political efficacy

When studying political participation, other variables are taken into consideration that capture how individuals relate to the political system beyond observable engagement behaviour. Behavioural measures are often complemented with attitudinal and relational dimensions that are closely associated with patterns of engagement.

Sense of belonging to a society or country is often discussed in research on political participation, as it is closely connected to civic and community involvement and to measures supporting civic and political empowerment. Voting as a form of political participation is often linked to perception of political legitimacy and can strengthen individuals' sense of belonging, which is in turn associated with broader processes of political integration (Doomernik, Kraler and Reichel, 2010). At the same time, individuals who feel more attached to their community and society often appear more willing to engage actively in public matters (Zani and Barrett, 2012). A migrant's strong sense of belonging also seems to strengthen their sense of entitlement to the same

rights and duties as locals, which can potentially translate into electoral turnout among migrants (Scuzzarello, 2015).

Subjective institutional trust is also considered an indicator of immigrants' political integration, particularly in terms of their political attitudes and orientation towards the political system. Like sense of belonging, the association between trust and political participation works in two directions. On the one hand, the more migrants trust institutions, the more likely they are to be politically active, from involvement in voluntary associations to more formal political engagement (Huddleston, 2017; Giugni and Grasso, 2020). On the other hand, institutional trust could also be interpreted as a political participation outcome because it is shaped by migrants' experiences with the laws, policies and practices that structure their opportunities to take part in political life. The degree of trust individuals have in institutions is closely linked to their sense of political agency, or their perceived ability to participate in politics, independently of their actual participation (OECD, 2024).

While institutional trust concerns how migrants view political institutions and their ability to access them, a related dimension is how effective they consider their own participation to be. Another relevant variable to consider in political participation is the perceived effectiveness of participation, that is, whether individuals perceive that their political and civic action is impactful. This concept is also known as political efficacy and is closely associated with individuals' willingness to take part in the political life (Zani and Barrett, 2012). Political engagement is therefore associated with individuals' expectations that their participation will achieve the desired results, although the direction of this relationship is not necessarily one-directional (Thorkelson, 2016).

These concepts capture how migrants perceive their place in society, their relationship to institutions and the effectiveness of their own participation. As such, they are typically examined using individual-level survey data.

The European Social Survey (ESS) is considered the leading European survey on political participation and has been conducted every five years since 1979 (Doomernik, Kraler and Reichel, 2010). It includes indicators for sense of belonging, institutional trust and political efficacy which are primarily located within two themes: "Well-being, exclusion, religion, discrimination, identity" and "Politics". In the first theme, sense of belonging is captured by questions that assess individuals' perceived identification with the broader community, their emotional attachment to the country and Europe, as well as their relative level of social participation compared to peers. Institutional trust is captured in the "Politics" theme through survey questions on trust in representative political institutions (such as national parliaments, political parties and politicians), as well as in the legal system and the police. Political efficacy is also covered in the "Politics" theme. It is addressed through questions on whether the political system allows people to influence politics and have a say in what the government does, as well as questions

about respondents' confidence in their ability to participate in politics, whether they find politics too complicated, how easy they think it is to take part, and whether they feel able to take an active role in a group involved with political issues.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

This data policy brief highlights significant data gaps in the measurement of migrant political participation, particularly in administrative data. Comparable, disaggregated information on voting behaviour, institutional representation, and non-electoral participation is available only for a small number of countries and election types. As a result, survey data, while indispensable, remain the primary source for comparative analysis, despite known limitations related to sample size and underrepresentation. These data constraints should be taken into account when interpreting findings on the links between participation policies and outcomes and reinforce the need for improved data collection practices. Data policy stakeholders should heed the following recommendations:

Address administrative data gaps on migrant political participation

The report highlights severe limitations in administrative data on migrant political participation. To improve evidence-based policymaking, governments should:

- Collect and publish disaggregated data on political participation by migrant background, where legally and ethically feasible,
- Harmonise definitions of “migrant” and related categories across administrative systems,
- Expand administrative data collection beyond eligibility and registration to include participation outcomes, such as turnout and representation,
- Develop safeguards to ensure data protection and prevent misuse of sensitive information.

Improved administrative data are essential for monitoring participation gaps, evaluating policy impact, and ensuring accountability.

Integrate administrative and survey data through coordinated data strategies

Given current constraints, policymakers should adopt mixed-data approaches by:

- Systematically combining administrative records with high-quality survey data such as the European Social Survey,
- Supporting oversampling of migrant populations in large-scale surveys,
- Encouraging longitudinal data collection to track participation trajectories over time.

At EU level, stronger coordination on data standards and funding for cross-national data infrastructure would significantly enhance comparative analysis.

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